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ABSTRACT

Perspectives on educational assessment in U.S. higher education are offered. Assessment is viewed as a tradition of evaluation based on theories and methods distinct from those that underlie tests and testing. Assessment is part of a new movement toward more active teaching and learning that focuses on performance, multiple judgments about this performance, and feedback to the student. Rather than focusing on what students know, the emphasis is on the abilities required for effective performance. Assessment is increasingly being used with adult learners, occupational and professional programs, teacher education, and liberal arts programs. It is claimed that assessment is the label for a new state insistence that campuses maintain minimum standards and demonstrate what students are actually learning. It is the label for a renewed campus interest in collecting information about student performance that is useful for evaluating the effectiveness of programs and the overall campus experience. Testing and accrediting agencies face the challenge of developing measures of real attainment as opposed to tests that indicate how the student performed relative to others taking the test. (SW)

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AN ASSESSMENT OF ASSESSMENT

Russell Edgerton
President
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An address prepared for the Closing Plenary Session of the Educational Testing Service Annual Invitational Conference, October 25, 1986, "Assessing the Outcomes of Higher Education."

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--an annual conference
(the first scheduled for June 14-17, 1987, in Denver)

--commissioned papers
(focused on implementation and other timely assessment concerns; available through the Forum for a small fee)

--information services
(including consultation, referrals, a national directory, and more)

This paper is part of an on-going assessment collection maintained by the Forum. We are pleased to make it more widely available through the ERIC system.

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I am flattered to be on this distinguished program...also awed by the audience and the assignment. I'm neither a testing/assessment specialist nor a foot soldier in the assessment movement. What I know comes from looking out my window, first at FIPSE, and now at AAHE, at the general flow of events in higher education.

So for courage, I turned to the inspiring words of Yogi Berra, who once said: "You can observe a lot by just watching."

For about eighteen months my colleagues and I at AAHE have been watching in fascination as assessment surfaced into a major public issue. What we see is lots of confusion--confusion even about what assessment is.

Given this state of affairs, I thought I might first try to describe what the "it" is, and what seems to be taking place around the country in the name of assessment. Then I'll try to draw back and comment on where we might go from here.

A Play of Four Acts

I've come to think of assessment as a play that has unfolded in four acts. In our current discussions, we tend to forget that the play has been running quite a while, so I'd like to balance this by concentrating especially on the earlier acts.

Act I.

Act I is titled, "An Idea Is Born." Scene I takes place, not on campus, not even in America, but in Great Britain. The time is World War II.

The British were faced with the problem that the corps of officers to serve in the military had to be very rapidly expanded. Some method had to be invented for selecting who from the rank and file would make good officers.

To do this, selection boards were set up and candidates were put through a series of exercises. These included standardized intelligence tests and five other paper-and-pencil psychological tests. Each candidate was also interviewed by a three-person team consisting of a psychiatrist, a deputy from the selection board, and another officer.

But this wasn't all. The centerpiece experience was a series of standardized performance situations. The candidates had to do things like (1) interview someone playing the role of the candidate's subordinate, (2) give a "morale" speech, (3) take command of a group and lead it to accomplish a task, and (4) perform in a leaderless group situation, such as improvising an escape. At a final conference, all the people who had observed the candidate

would get together to discuss the candidate's suitability for officer status.

In the summer of 1943, an American official from the newly created Office of Strategic Services observed all this and brought it back to us. OSS was faced with a task similar to that of the British: Who should be sent behind enemy lines?

OSS took the British methods and added a new ingredient. A team of Harvard psychologists led by Henry Murray was enticed to work on the problem too; their belief was that by carefully observing how people behaved in various situations, one could infer underlying patterns of personality. By systematically varying the nature of situations individuals were put in, it was possible to construct a "picture of the whole person."

By war's end, Murray's theories and all the wartime experiments had come together into a new tradition called "assessment." As Georgine Loacker from Alverno College has reminded us, the word has Latin roots: "ad" plus "sedere" means, literally, "to sit down beside."

This ends scene I. Techniques like the leaderless discussion group and the in-basket exercise gradually seeped into industry and government. But by and large these new methods were pooh-poohed by psychologists and testing professionals. The tradition might have died were it not for Douglas Bray, a researcher at AT&T.

Act I, Scene II, opens at AT&T in the mid-fifties. Bray was hired to establish a new program of basic research on managerial careers. To obtain base-line data for his studies, he established what he called an assessment center and put samples of AT&T employees through 3 1/2-day assessments at these centers. And--you guessed it--he demonstrated that assessment methods were smashingly successful at identifying who AT&T's successful managers would be.

Word filtered out through industrial psychologists and soon major corporations were starting assessment centers. Bray's scientific methods reinforced the intuition of corporate leaders that the abilities being measured were the ones that really counted in managerial success. In the 1970's the assessment center concept took off.

Thus, an idea was born that would soon travel to higher education.

I've told this story at length because it helps underscore a fundamental point about assessment. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that "a word is but the skin of a living thought." The thought that lives inside the word "assessment" is a different thought from the one that lives inside words like "test" and "testing."

First of all, assessment focuses beyond what an individual knows to the abilities brought into play as the individual actually performs a task.

When we apply for a driver's license, we take a "test" on our knowledge of the rules of the road. Then we go out and give a sample of our ability to drive--or at least parallel park. The first is a test of knowledge, the second an assessment of competent performance.

(Granted, the sample is not what it might be. Very few people each year are killed parallel parking.)

Assessment also has a second, crucial characteristic. At its core, assessment is a methodology of multiple judgments. Candidates are put in various situations. For the "purists," at least one of these situations should be a simulation--like the in-basket test, where individuals work for several hours on a variety of things in their in-box, and then explain why they did what they did. Expert judgments of various assessors are pooled before a final conclusion is reached.

Thus, a single paper-and-pencil test, a single panel interview, or even a single performance exercise--when there is no pool of observations to judge--is not, technically speaking, an assessment.

This ends Act I. In the next three acts, three different groups of actors come onto the stage. They all borrow from this tradition and carry on work in the name of assessment. But this is about all they have in common. Under the label assessment, they are really pursuing quite different ends.

Act II.

In Act II of the play, assessment is brought onto the college campus. The time is the 1970's, though there are flashbacks to earlier periods. The actors are principally individuals who work directly with students--faculty and counselors on the cutting edge of various movements in educational reform.

They belong to different departments, usually aren't aware of each other's work, and don't think of themselves as pioneers of a new movement. What they share is a common interest in pushing higher learning beyond a focus on teaching and evaluating what students know to teaching and evaluating what they can do--that is, to a focus on abilities required for effective performance.

One scene takes place in admissions and counseling offices on campuses that began dealing with large numbers of returning adult students. Some way is needed to help these

adults translate their checkered educational backgrounds and informal learning into a currency that can be awarded academic credit. So these actors start asking their students to develop portfolios that can document their knowledge and competence. The Council for the Assessment of Experiential Learning is created to set standards for this process.

In another scene, faculty in occupational and professional programs struggle to define the competencies required for effective performance in their fields. They are bothered by the lack of fit between what's taught in the classroom and what counts on the job. They turn to the assessment tradition to bring the two worlds closer together.

The field of teacher education offers the latest example of a professional field turning to assessment. The "Holmes group" and the Carnegie Forum have recently issued major reports, calling for the transformation of teaching into a full-fledged profession. Carnegie has called for the creation of a new national board that will develop standards and procedures for entering the profession. Look closely at the initial vision for this process, developed by Lee Shulman and Gary Sykes of Stanford, and you'll see--not testing--but assessment. Candidates for teaching certificates will not simply take written tests but undergo full-fledged, 2-1/2-day "assessments": in-basket exercises, video-taped samples of actual teaching, "the woiks."

In the final scene in Act II, actors in liberal arts colleges and general education programs also turn to assessment. In 1973, Alverno College in Milwaukee decides to take abilities out from the shadows of the assumed curriculum and make them into an explicit "second curriculum." To help assess whether their students are indeed acquiring these abilities, they establish--with the help of AT&T--an assessment center. Others don't go as far as Alverno. But the idea that abilities like critical thinking, communicating, problem-solving, and making value decisions are central, and should be explicitly taught, slowly flows into the bloodstream. The AAC report, Integrity in the Curriculum, finally gives this idea the good housekeeping seal of approval.

In the course of these developments, assessment comes to be used in a new way. Assessment developed, like testing, as a method of selection--a way to judge who should move ahead. This was how assessment was used in WW II. It was how it was used by AT&T.

But many of the educators who turned to assessment in the 1970's didn't want merely to judge student performance. They wanted to improve it. They asked the question, if abilities such as learning how to learn are as important as

we say they are, how are they taught? The answer they came to was...they aren't. At least they aren't taught in the conventional sense of teaching by telling. Students learn about things by being told; they learn how to do things by doing them.

John Dewey said it best when he wrote that students cannot be taught many of the things they need to learn...but they can be coached. The role of the teacher, then, in part, is to create conditions and design tasks through which students can learn through performance...and then comment on this performance as it goes along. That is, to be assessors.

To the players in Act II, then, assessment is a crucial dimension of effective teaching. Rather than view tests and exams as an afterthought--things that get administered at the end of a course because a record needs to be kept--they view them as a way to give students feedback on their performance.

A final scene in this act takes place inside the medical profession. Years ago, McMasters University in Canada converted to a curriculum that focused learning around real problems of medical practice. Rather than stuff students full of knowledge for two years and then place them in clinical practice, they start their students off, from day one, working in collaborative teams, solving problems, acquiring abilities of lifelong learning.

Last year, Harvard began an experimental program--called New Pathways--based on this approach...and this has boosted its national visibility. Assessment, in all this, is key. FIPSE's round of grants for assessment, just announced, includes grants to the University of New Mexico's School of Medicine to establish a medical self-assessment center and to five New England universities to implement skills assessments for fourth-year medical students.

Act III.

After an intermission, Act III opens on a very different note. The scene shifts to state capitols around the country. The time is the late 1970's and early 1980's. The central actors are legislators and governors, and campus leaders who deal with them.

All of you are familiar with the particular chain of events that aroused interest in the quality of our schools and colleges. Attention focuses first on the need for a larger pool of talented students in math and science. Then, with the release of The Nation at Risk report, this turns into a generalized concern about the quality of high schools. After several years of school reform, concern spills over into how things are going at the college and university level.

Even before the quality of undergraduate education became a popular issue, some states begin worrying about students being admitted to college--and advancing--who seem to lack basic academic skills. Understandably, the states turn to the tools they used to enforce new standards on the schools: mandated tests. New Jersey begins the parade in 1977-78 with a statewide program of testing entering college students for basic skills. Georgia follows with a basic skills test for "rising juniors." Florida mandates both. Tennessee steps forward with a required entry-level test and a new twist, financial incentives for institutions to assess their two-year and four-year outcomes.

Much of this is done in the name of assessment. But needless to say, this version of assessment, motivated primarily by a concern for maintaining minimum standards of entry and academic progress, is a far cry from the assessment tradition we saw earlier. Minimum competency testing often relies on a single test as a basis for judgment. The test results are used for selection and comparison--as hurdles for students, and, further, as a basis for drawing comparisons among institutions.

As this act unfolds, these early state initiatives draw lots of fire. The presidents of the Educational Testing Service and the College Board, to their credit, both speak out against overrelying on standardized tests to enforce minimum standards. They argue that:

--the focus on minimum competencies will skew priorities away from the more advanced knowledge and abilities that were also the concern of college;

--you shouldn't rely on a single test for advancement to matriculant or junior status, any more than you should rely just on a SAT score to determine admission to college;

--you shouldn't take performance scores on standardized exams and use these to infer things about the quality of programs students passed through. The exams were simply not designed for this purpose.

Evidence, especially from Florida, about the effect of minimum competency testing on minorities give these arguments special poignancy and force.

Two years ago, educators feared that versions of the "Florida model" might spread to other states. But due to arguments like those just cited, and the effects of minimum competency testing on minorities, the pressure seems now to have eased. Impressive governors such as Thomas Kean of New Jersey and John Ashcroft of Missouri have chaired thoughtful studies about how states should act to bring about quality

improvement. The state-level conversation about assessment is now framed by their reports.

Peter Ewell of NCHEMS, who scouts the state policy terrain better than anyone I know, reports that the states now seem to be sorting themselves out into three basic camps.

First, there are states that lean toward the Florida end of the scale and have, or are seriously considering, statewide mandated tests of various kinds. A few of these states (New Jersey, Texas, and Maryland come to mind) have backed off the idea of rising-junior exams, and are refocusing their attention on entry testing and longer-term developmental work on outcomes.

Second, there are states that are setting statewide objectives for assessment, but permitting institutions to develop their own ways of finding out and reporting on how these objectives are being met. The state might say, we want you to report on student achievement in general education--you figure out what particular instruments to use.

A third category of states is requiring that institutions undertake concrete, regular investigations of educational outcomes in relation to their own instructional goals. In effect, they are saying: Show us that you have a good assessment process in place.

In all cases, however, the states are saying: We're tired of looking at college quality in terms of faculty/student ratios, library books, buildings and equipment, and other resources. We want you to measure college quality in terms of actual student learning.

One last point: Some states are also putting money on one or two institutions to be guinea pigs. In some cases, the initiative comes from the state; in others, campuses have stepped forward on their own and the state has recognized their leadership. So now, Missouri has its Northeast Missouri State; Virginia has James Madison University; New Jersey has Kean College; Colorado has Colorado State; and New York has Plattsburg and Empire State...all engaged in programs of assessment.

<u>Act IV</u>.

In Act IV, the stage shifts back to the campus. But the actors are not the original innovators who first led the assessment movement. This time, they are vice presidents, deans, directors of offices of institutional research, department chairs, and others concerned about evaluating academic programs and the effects of the overall campus experience.

They feel vulnerable to charges that they really don't have much evidence about how their students are really performing. Some believe that it's important to take preventive action: "If more assessment is to be done, better us than someone else." Others have more authentic educational interests, and concede the point: We should know more about how our students are doing.

Those that have thought hard about these matters also concede that our present evaluation activities fall short in two crucial respects.

Most campuses have offices of institutional research. In the early days, these offices evaluated curricula, assessed student achievement, predicted student success, compared different teaching methods, and studied student attitudes and satisfaction. But in the 1960's, with the arrival of computers and new pressures for managerial information, the focus of most of these offices shifted. They now produce reports on student flow, costs per credit hour, faculty salaries, surveys of teaching loads, and a dozen other topics deemed important for planning and budgeting...but unrelated to student learning.

Consequently, we know a lot about how students are administered, but very little about whether they are learning anything. The promise of the early efforts at institutional research has gone unfulfilled.

Second, the researchers who are asking important questions about student learning are doing so on a separate and independent track from the decision makers on and off campus who might use the results. As Derek Bok points out in his new book Higher Learning, research studies on the impacts of the undergraduate experience have rarely come about at the request of faculty members or deans. The questions researchers have asked are not necessarily the questions that deans and faculty members want answered--or governors.

There are, as always, notable exceptions. This past year, the comprehensive assessment programs of Alverno College, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, and Northeast Missouri State--all described in Peter Ewell's timely book, The Self-Regarding Institution--have become highly visible national models. But three out of three thousand isn't a very big number.

Now, a new generation of efforts is starting up. Even the prestige universities and hot colleges are feeling the need to be able to talk about their quality from a position of strength--that is, with evidence. At Harvard, Derek Bok has asked Richard Light, an expert on evaluation from the Kennedy School of Government, to organize a new project.

Each month several dozen key faculty and administrators are getting together, joined by guests from other campuses, to ask questions about issues like...

--Writing. What is the concrete evidence that we are really teaching this ability well? What do we know about what works?

--Instruction. What methods are in place for giving faculty "fast feedback" on their effectiveness?

--Programs, like New Pathways. How can these approaches be evaluated?

Act IV is still going on. In my version of the last scene, all the actors come out onto the stage and move around, passing each other. At first they pass each other without recognition, then notice each other but aren't sure what to do. They turn and look to the center, waiting for leadership....

A Pop Quiz

So much for the play. Now for a pop quiz.

Assessment is:

A. A specific tradition of evaluation based on theories and methods distinct from those that underlie tests and testing.

B. Part of a new movement toward more active teaching and learning, that focuses on performance, multiple judgments about this performance, and feedback to the student.

C. The label for a new state insistence that campuses maintain minimum standards and demonstrate what students are actually learning.

D. The label for a renewed campus interest in collecting information about student performance that is useful for evaluating the effectiveness of programs and the overall campus experience.

E. All of the above.

You got it. It's all of the above...which is why the play is at once confusing, depressing, and exciting.

A Better Script

Well, what about it? Should the play go on? Actually, it will go on, no matter what the reviews are in The Chronicle of Higher Education. What we can influence is the quality of the performance.

Daniel Yankelovich has noted that public issues tend to go through cycles. First there is a consciousness-raising phase...a time when we become aware that a problem exists. Then there is a phase that he calls the "working through process" when the issues become clarified, the implications understood. Finally there is the phase when we settle into a common judgment that informs a course of action.

Campuses and states are now strung out along various points of the working-through process. A handful of campuses and a half-dozen states, early leaders in the movement, have made up their minds about what should be done...but most have not. This means that there is time to do things right.

The question is, how are we going to use this time? At the moment, the campus engagement with assessment is a mile wide and an inch deep. Are we going to regard assessment as an issue to finesse--to dispose of as quickly as possible? Or are we going to take it to the level it deserves--and deal with the the deeper questions about our educational purposes?

If the latter, each of the actors in the drama has some challenging questions to work through.

<u>The States</u>.

Take the states. The first question the states must face up to is: Do we want our campuses simply to document student performance or really improve it?

In the negative scenario, the states will simply lay on new layers of tests and reporting requirements, and misuse the data collected for simplistic institutional comparisons. (Given the penchant for statistical measures of quality control, and America's love of score-keeping, we kid ourselves if we think that data, once collected, won't be used--<u>and misused</u>--for comparisons.)

In the positive scenario, the states would say...you've been too smug (which is true)...we don't want you to go on assuming that your students are learning...we want you to collectand confront evidence on the point...and we want you to do so in a way that the information comes actually to be used to improve the education you provide.
A second question for the states is: What <u>level</u> of performance do we have in mind?

To date, the campus dialogue with the states has turned on minimum standards. It's like the dialogue that started in the late 1970's between the automobile industry and the larger public. When the automobile industry turned out cars that had defective brakes, doors that rattled, and so on, the public got fed up and demanded improvement.

Our own equivalent to cars with defective brakes are students who accept public student-aid funds and then don't show up for class; athletes who are carried along without meeting minimum expectations for academic performance; and graduates who cannot write clear sentences. The public has a right to feel outraged about these things. We should too.

But all this defines a quality product as one that is absent of obvious defects. We should all hope that the public expects more of our students and our colleges, and we expect more of ourselves, than this!

The difficulty, of course, is that higher standards are harder to agree on. It's easy to agree on minimums. But as we aspire to higher levels, we run into the problem that standards can be set only in the context of some definition of what objectives are most important to us. If we want to purchase a car that is not simply free of obvious defects, but performs at a higher level, we have to answer another set of questions: Do we care most about gas mileage...in which case we'd buy a small, light car; or safety, in which case we'd buy a heavier car. Lacking such judgments, we can't really evaluate what we mean by higher performance.

So it is with students. What learnings during the college years do we care most about? Are we satisfied if our students acquire enough specialized knowledge to find a professional, technical, or managerial job? Or do we want them to have the capability to improve their jobs, and learn new jobs over their careers? And how about attitudes such as tolerance of people different from them, or feeling responsible for others?

A third question is: Do we want to improve performance, whatever the cost, or do we see the quality movement in a context of overall social needs?

The shortest and easiest way to improve quality, in one view, is to raise admissions standards and let in only those students who are academically gifted and easy to teach.

But we can't maintain our democratic way of life on into the next century by simply focusing our educational energies on the top 25%--or even 50%--of high school graduates.

Everything I read about work in the new economy and citizenship in the information age suggests that we must broaden the base of talent as well:

> --We are going to earn our national living, not because old-fashioned entrepreneurs establsh new organizations along Taylorist principles...but because whole organizations are dynamic--that is, staffed with managers and workers who are enterprising and capable of change. As Rosabeth Kanter puts it, the new entrepreneurship consists of

"thousands of little battles of people with initiative."

--Twenty years ago, I used to teach my political science students that political information flowed in a two-stage process...party leaders and other elites would pass the cues about what to do along to the rank and file. Now, courtesy of Dan Rather, every citizen learns what Reagan said to Gorbachev at the same time as Bob Dole and Tip O'Neil, and we don't wait for them to make up our minds...

In brief, shortcut strategies to quality improvement don't meet our real needs. We have to expand access and improve quality at the same time.

The Campus

Whether or not the states are willing to be firm but flexible, in turn, depends on whether campus leaders take assessment as a serious issue...and then move it in positive directions.

Peter Ewell reports that many campuses now see assessment as something to be undertaken for the sake of appearances. Committees are being set up, simply as a response to external pressures. Their work is not connected to curriculum planning or review, budget planning or review, or any other decisions that count.

A negative scenario is not hard to foresee. Assessment, so managed, will become another bureaucratic add-on. In addition to taking course examinations, students will have to take a new battery of exams administered by officials in some remote office. The faculty will regard all this as yet another plot by administrators to hassle their lives.

Alternatively, campus leaders could view the emergence of the assessment issue as a timely moment to reengage serious and basic questions: What are our students really learning? What are they like when they leave? How can we improve our contribution to their development?

The good news, from those campuses that have taken this path, is that it is good for one's health. At Alverno, Northeast Missouri State, and Tennessee-Knoxville, the interest in assessment started as an administratiive initiative. But the faculty, initially suspicious, were brought into the process and soon assumed ownership of it. Assessment turned up evidence that has prompted real program improvements. The process has enhanced their visibility and prestige. Enrollments are up. And assessment has justified increased funding.

The cautious news is that each of these models came about through a long, evolutionary process. The stimulus, and the support, came over a decade ago. The Tennessee Commission on Higher Education, the stimulus for the UT-Knoxville's work, started working on a performance-funding project in the mid-1970's. Alverno introduced its curriculum in 1973. Northeast Missouri has been at this about the same period of time. The quick fix just isn't in the cards.

Testing and Accrediting Agencies

Much will also depend on the attitudes taken, and roles played, by the testing agencies and other organizations that provide esential products and set standards for quality.

Testing and assessment require expertise. Colleges need help to do it right. But the kind of help they need, in the first instance, is not a test but a service. They need someone to talk to who can say, "If you want to measure this learning outcome, or that program, then here are the tools that are available." They need primers and guides for how to get started...how to clarify and put values on the outcomes they want to assess, how to frame issues in the most productive way.

In a context, then, of understanding and authoritative advice, colleges will need new instruments for measuring student performance. But they don't need full-course, take-it-or-leave-it meals so much as menus and access to cafeterias of products, in various price ranges, from which they can select what's most useful...products they can build into their own, home-grown assessment programs.

Some of these products might be standardized tests, but not necessarily the ones now on the shelf...or at least not in the package they now come in. The difficulty with present instruments is that they are designed for purposes of selection. Given this purpose, the tests are constructed so as to spread out student differences for the purpose of relative rankings. The ideal test item is one which 50% of the students answer correctly, and 50% fail.

The answers on this sort of test con't tell us what students know or can do in relation to some criterion of actual performance, but simply on how well they perform relative to the others taking the test. Accordingly, these answers are not very useful for the purpose of giving feedback to students, or for evaluating the quality of the academic program they experienced.

Indeed, in the case of a number of standardized tests, students and institutions can't even obtain the information about what they answered right and wrong. The scores they receive are scores derived from the performance of all the test takers.

I'm just a country lawyer, but it seems to me that testing agencies are now in a new era. It's an era that calls upon agencies such as the Educational Testing Service to rethink its mission; to consider becoming, in name and self-concept, the Educational Testing and Assessment Service; to move beyond the development of selection tests to the development of measures of real attainment; and to think not only about how to develop products but how to provide services to campuses and states struggling with issues beyond their comprehension.

Accrediting agencies face an even more challenging set of questions. Everywhere I turn--be it presidents, state officials, or the research community--I find a growing sentiment for a major overhaul. But this is a topic for another day.

A Common Agenda

I want to turn to one final theme. Besides facing up to the deeper issues, we need to find a common agenda. The campuses can't do it right acting simply on their own. Yet outside agencies can't be expected to invest resources in new developmental programs unless campuses and states clarify what the priorities are.

All of higher education doesn't have to be interested in assessment in order to entice some big players into the game. But those who are interested do have to work together to define some collective needs. So, we return to the quandry of what--beyond minimum standards--is important to assess.

This is no time to take the lid fully off this box, but I do want to make some parting comments about the direction we should all point our compasses.

First, which way is north? Much of the conversation about undergraduate reform in the past few years has looked inward and back, to the golden era of the 1960's. If only we could return to the days of yesteryear when students arrived with high SAT scores; when they were socially concerned and enrolling in liberal arts courses; when the curriculum was coherent; when faculty salaries were high, and so on. The base lines for studies by Astin, Bowen, and many others are rooted in that era. We see ourselves as having fallen from that high estate.

Whatever one's view of those times, the reality is that they are gone...and the conditions that made it possible will never return. North is not inward and back, but outward and forward. We need to derive our expectations for what students should learn from the requirements of the future.

Second, it's a future in which the requirements for specialization, for knowledge in depth, will intensify. We

should take it for granted that our students will need to pursue more and more specialized subjects.

The challenge here, for teaching, testing, and assessment, is to move along the path outlined in T. S. Eliot's "The Rock": "Where is the knowledge lost in information? Where is the wisdom lost in knowledge?" The only way I know to help students deal with spreading complexity and accelerating change is to help them grasp more and more of the underlying pattern of things.

Students who rushed into computer science in the last ten years are going to wish, in another ten, that they had gotten a better grounding in basic mathematics. In a world of change, only what's fundamental endures. And there's nothing more fundamental than a high-powered theory.

I worry, therefore, that higher standards and more testing might simply add to the already heavy pressures for that easiest of matters to test, subject-matter coverage. As Charles Muscatine has remarked, for many students, "taking a course is like trying to get a sip of water from a fire hose." Students are deluged with information. I've never met a faculty member who didn't believe that most of what he or she knew was indispensable knowledge for everyone.

We need, then, to discipline ourselves...to test and assess our students for their grasp of only the most fundamental and key concepts. Less is better than more. Knowledge is better than information. Understanding is better than knowledge.

Third, most all of us would agree that our students should acquire more than simply specialized knowledge. We're very unclear about what the stuff of this remaining agenda is.

I think we are on the verge of a new construct, a new way to conceive and think about the breadth requirements of undergraduate education. The old construct was a construct of general and liberal knowledge. It was based on the Renaissance ideal of a person in touch with all the basic fields of knowledge. It made great sense at the turn of the century. It makes little sense today.

The new construct is not built around a commitment that a given body of knowledge is essential. Rather, it is built around the view that certain abilities, attitudes, and perhaps even certain social skills are essential to effective performance in a wide variety of roles. These can be acquired in the course of both specalized and general studies.

Given this view, I very much hope that the assessment movement can steer around the sterile debate over general and liberal knowledge. Some campuses may want to follow Secretary Bennett's old-time religion and return to a

classic curriculum. Others may follow a different path. Our view should be, as Senator Howard Baker used to say, "I ain't got no dog in that fight."

Whatever the context for subject-matter knowledge, we all should be able to agree on the higher-order abilities that are required in a society of spreading complexity and accelerating change. This is the first and foremost agenda for collective action. It's what the thoughtful elements of the general public most expect college graduates to have. It's what the original promise of the assessment tradition is all about.

Suppose, for instance, that several consortiums of institutions got together and committed themselves to the objective of turning out graduates who could communicate what they know effectively. This would build upon the acknowledged importance of writing, and the writing-across-the-curriculum movement, but take it to a new and more complex ability level. It would include the intellectual acts of synthesizing information, as well as the sensitivities and techniques of writing, listening, and speaking.

Faculties within the participating institutions, in many disciplines, would pledge to teach and assess their students for this ability. Students taking course work would be asked to demonstrate what they know, not only on paper-and-pencil tests, and not only in writing, but also by communicating their ideas in various social situations. ETS or other agencies could prepare guides for how to design these situations, how to train assessors, and what to look for.

One final point. Let's remember that while abilities like communicating effectively are a doable agenda for the near future, our long-term common agenda includes other characteristics as well.

As I look to the future, everything I see suggests that four clusters of characteristics are becoming ever more important:

--The first is captured by words like initiative, persistence, drive, and risk-taking;

--The second by words like flexibility, resourcefulness, and openness to change;

--The third by words like character, integrity, and responsibility toward others;

--The fourth by words like leadership and effectiveness in working with others.

As I look to the environments from which our students are coming, everything I see suggests that families and other institutions that used to foster these characteristics have weakened, while other institutions that erode these characteristics, like the mass media, have grown in strength and influence.

So, the big question lying ahead is, what role will colleges and universities play in this? Are we going to drift along passively with the dominant culture and simply offer students an assembly line of courses? Or are we going to muster the internal convictions and public support to play a counterweight role in American life...to develop educational processes that are empowering, educational environments that affirm important values, and thus turn out students who will create the kind of society we want to live in?

When we pass out grades and tests, we make decisions about these deeper values. We now distribute grades and scores as if students were in a contest with each other...a context in which many compete but few are victors. Yet we increasingly serve students who don't need to lose more races; they need to be showered with praise for things really mastered. And the world they will enter requires not only competition but cooperation.

Why do we hold our students accountable for individual performance when the world demands group performance? Why do we give grades in the first place? What should we make of the fact that some of the colleges that have thought most deeply about these issues, and have the most intensive and comprehensive programs of assessment--institutions such as the McMasters University Medical School and Alverno College--don't give grades at all?

Let us hope, in short, that the assessment movement will bring us to reflect, more deeply than we otherwise would have done, on what we are trying to accomplish.

Thank you.